

Gore in Warren, Michigan: a snapshot of the Democratic campaign

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With little time left before the election and Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore narrowly trailing Republican George W. Bush in most polls, the Gore campaign has taken on an air of urgency, bordering on desperation.

Polls have shown Bush narrowing the gap in California, in part because of growing support for Green Party candidate Ralph Nader. California voted overwhelmingly for Bill Clinton in the 1996 election and is crucial to Gore's election chances. In the past week Gore has revisited Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Oregon and Washington, states that a few weeks ago had appeared to be solidly in the Democratic camp. In Michigan, another state critical to the Democrats, Gore and Bush are reportedly in a dead heat.

With its hopes of defeating Bush in jeopardy, the Gore camp has decided to sharply curtail the populist rhetoric of the post-convention period. The Democratic candidate has instead settled on stressing his credentials as a fiscally responsible politician who will be better able to manage the economy and conduct foreign policy due to his greater experience. At the same time Gore is targeting key constituencies of so-called swing voters, for the most part middle class professionals and better off sections of workers, with measured doses of populist demagoguery.

This reporter witnessed the Gore campaign in action at a rally October 29 at the campus of Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan, a working class suburb of Detroit and home to several General Motors and Chrysler auto plants. The banner "Great Lakes Prosperity Tour" set the tone for what was a low-key and uninspiring affair.

There were three or four thousand in the audience—auto workers and other trade unionists, teachers and other professionals, and a smattering of

college-age youth. No one looked particularly poor or hard pressed. There was a noticeable presence of middle-aged men in union jackets. No doubt the AFL-CIO union bureaucracy made strenuous efforts to get a turnout. Yet it was a relatively small crowd for an area that is home to hundreds of thousands of trade unionists, African Americans and other key Democratic constituencies.

From informal conversations with audience members it was clear that, while there was genuine hatred of George W. Bush, there was little enthusiasm for Gore. People talked about the negative things they anticipated from Bush, not any great hopes linked to the Democratic candidate. There was a remarkable absence of Gore-for-president buttons or bumper stickers.

Democratic Congressman Sander Levin of Michigan made the opening remarks, followed by Congressman David Bonior. They gave by far the most populist-sounding speeches of the afternoon, warning that right-wing Republicans such as Congressman Dick Armey of Texas would "be in the saddle" were Bush to win.

For their part, Gore and his running mate Joe Lieberman never mentioned the Republican right or uttered the name Bill Clinton. In a thoroughly right-wing speech, Lieberman made virtually no appeal on social questions. He cited what he considered the three main accomplishments of the Clinton-Gore administration—"the federal government at its smallest size in four decades, welfare roles falling, the crime rate down." He continued: "The government in Texas has grown, the federal government has shrunk since Gore became vice president. The American Academy of Actuaries says Bush outspends Al Gore."

Lieberman ended with a jab at the entertainment industry, declaring, "We will stand with you for a more moral America."

The Connecticut Senator's comments epitomized the disconnect between the Democratic Party establishment and the masses of working people. While Lieberman presumably believed his harping on “morals” and “values” would resonate with the crowd, this was hardly the case. This reporter saw many signs of restlessness during Lieberman's remarks. His closing pledge to restore morality to America drew only a smattering of applause. For the most part there were perplexed looks and an almost audible groan from a number of people in the audience, particularly young workers and students.

Compared to Lieberman, Gore sounded almost radical. Nevertheless, his rhetoric was markedly toned down from his speech at the Democratic convention. His remarks were laced with calls for fiscal responsibility. He made no appeal to the concerns of the more impoverished sections of the working class.

Gore's biggest applause lines were his pledge to oppose school vouchers and his call for a tax deduction for college tuition. He noted that Bush's economic plan would give more money in tax breaks to 90,000 millionaires than for 90,000 public schools.

There was no mention of big oil, big polluters, or big tobacco. Gone were pledges to fight for “the people against the powerful.”

The inability of the Gore campaign to enthuse working class voters is not simply the result of personal failings or miscalculations. In the final analysis, it points to the enormous gap between the interests of the wealthy elite to which the Democratic Party is beholden and the aspirations of the broad masses of the American people.



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